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ABSTRACT

In the 20 months that Isabel Peron served as the first female chief of state of a South American country, the mass media in Argentina underwent extreme stress. The Montoneros, a militant leftist organization, called for mass demonstrations against the orthodox Peronist people in their tabloid "La Causa Peronista." The tabloid's counterpart, "El Caudillo," took a position to the right of the government and called upon the government to use a heavy hand on leftists and other political troublemakers. While articles in "El Caudillo" urged support for the legitimacy, vitality, and good sense of the administration of Mrs. Peron, articles in "La Causa Peronista" vehemently attacked that legitimacy, vitality, and good sense. When "La Causa Peronista" took responsibility for and bragged about the execution of Argentina's president, Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, the government confiscated all copies of the tabloid and ordered it shut down and its editors arrested. The government issued a decree that prohibited mention of the name Montonero in newspapers or any other news media. Further, news media were threatened over publishing information that encouraged violence or supported proscribed organizations even obliquely. The wording was vague and left newspapers wondering what they could and could not publish. Despite some spectacular raids and political successes, the government won the war against the Montoneros. Nevertheless, on March 26, 1978, the Army deposed Isabel Peron, and once again the military was in charge in Argentina. (HOD)

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Extremist Media and the Rise of Terrorism: The Argentine Case

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Maria Estela Martinez de Peron became president of Argentina on July 1, 1974 and continued in office until March 28, 1976, when she was removed by the military in a bloodless coup d'etat. In the twenty months that "Isabel" Peron served as the hemisphere's first female chief of state, the mass media in Argentina, along with other elements of the society, underwent extreme stress. The mass media, indeed have been involved in the Peronista movement since October 17, 1945, when newspaper reports and radio broadcasts of a radio actress named Eva Duarte sent tens of thousands of workers into Argentina's Plaza de Mayo to demand that the military government release from arrest and reinstate to the labor ministry, Col. Juan Domingo Peron.[1]

Peron built a reputation as a "friend of the workingman," in his position as Minister of Labor. Eva Duarte had chronicled his increasing popularity and aided his rise to power with her on-the-spot broadcasts of his efforts to improve the lot of the workingman. The generals who ran the government realized that Peron had grown too popular for their good, so they

forced him to resign, put him under arrest and took him to Martin Garcia Island in the middle of the River Platte estuary. The generals were forced to release Peron and allow him to address the multitudes in Plaza Mayo. A week later, Peron and Eva Duarte were married.

From the time he crossed the waters of the River Platte back to Buenos Aires until he set sail on the Paraguayan gunboat for exile 10 year later, Peron dominated Argentina mass media. In 1951, at the height of his political power, Peron paid no attention to outraged world public opinion and confiscated La Prensa, to silence the famed newspaper's criticism of his regime.[2]

Peron was driven from power by a military coup in 1955 and remained in exile in Central America, the Caribbean and Spain until November 20, 1972, when he returned in triumph to Argentina.[3] He became president of Argentina once again in 1973 following the resignation of Hector Campora, who had been elected president as a stand-in for Peron. Another presidential election was called. That special election brought Peron back to power. Isabel was listed as vice president on the ticket, something that had been denied "Evita" Peron in 1951.[4]

A few months after he took office, Peron paid a visit to Paraguay. That was June, 1974, and on his return suffered a pulmonary infection that aggravated a long-standing heart condition. He died July 1, 1974.

This paper, covers the first months of the presidency of Maria Estela Martinez de Peron, and examines an interesting set of circumstances in the history of journalism in this hemisphere. Peron's political genius lay in

his ability to get diverse and often antithical segments of Argentine society to work together. He came back into power by courting the leftwing of the Argenting labor and university movement while at the same time holding onto the move conservative "descamisados" who after 30 years of labor reform, were much more middle class than radica.. Almost as soon as he assumed office Peron began moving his government to the right and, at the time he died, was facing fomidable and well organized opposition from the left.

In his first two presidential terms Peron had consolidated his hold over the labor movement. He had raised the living standards of the working classes but he had also given high salaries and budgets to the military. And he had controlled the press.[5] In the months before he was overthrown, he had railed against Communism and had decried leftists of all shades.

After the 1956 coup which sent him into exile there were successive failures of military and civilian governments. This gave Peron the hope that he might be able to return to Argentina because his was the only viable political force in the country. It was then that actively courting the leftists Hector Campora, the man who represented Peronismo in Argentina between 1955 and 1972 became an avowed leftist.

It would be well, at this point, to identify two of the organizations on the left and the role they played in the return to power of Peronismo.

The first is the Peoples Revolutionary Army (Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo--ERP) a marxist organization with a cadre of trained revolutionaries that began terrorist activities--kidnappings, raids on military establishments, propaganda efforts--in 1969.[6] The ERP was declared illegal by the government and the mass media were forbidden to use the name of the organization. When

acts of terrorism were attributed to the ERP the media were obliged to refer to "that subversive organization that has been declared illegal by the government." The People's Revolutionary Army had financed its operations in part from ransom it collected from kidnapping businessmen and industrial leaders. The ERP said a state of war existed between it and the Argentine government. It published a newspaper, clandestinely, called "Combate," and distributed regular press bulletins and news releases to foreign and Argentine mass media. The Argentine media were forbidden to use the information or even acknowledge its existence. International media--the wire service and newspaper correspondents in Buenos Aires were not restricted from using the material, but as a rule ignored most ERP communications.

In 1970 another militant leftist organization appeared. The Montoneros--a name honored in the gaucho tradition of Argentina--were youthful leftwing Peronists who had grown up never having known Peron. The organization worked for the return of Peron among the university students and young working class throughout Argentina, and published various periodicals during the Presidencies of Juan Peron and during the early months of the Presidency of Isabel Peron. One of these, a weekly called El Descamisado, changed its name to La Causa Peronista and played a dramatic role early in Mrs. Peron's term.

The counterpart in Peronism to La Causa Peronista was the weekly El Caudillo de la Tercera Posicion. El Caudillo took a position to the right of the Isabel Peron government while actively and vociverously supporting her. El Caudillo published inflammatory articles calling upon the government to use a heavy hand on leftists and all other political "troublemakers."

It was in these two periodicals that the battlelines were drawn in the early weeks of Mrs. Peron's term. The traditional press was greatly affected by the clash of ideologies articulated by the Montoneros in La Causa Peronista and the "orthodox" Peronistas in El Caudillo.

The death of Peron on July 1, 1974, brought a period of genuine and widespread national mourning. The General Federation of Labor and the National Organization of Business and Industry in a rare show of solidarity, closed businesses, factories, shops and entertainment establishments for 24 to 36 hours. Newspapers and radio broadcasts were filled with eulogies and praise. Thousands of people thronged the thoroughfares to watch Peron's funeral cortege. At the Congress, where Peron lay in state, leaders of the national political parties spoke eloquently and sincerely of Peron's accomplishments. Most articulate of the group was Ricardo Balbin, septegenarian leader of the Civic Radical Party (Union Civica Radical) and a longtime political opponent of Peron. At the same time there seemed to be a genuine outpouring of support for Peron's widow and the country's new president. Only La Prensa departed from unabashed praise and adulation. La Prensa published an obituary which was really a warts-and-all portrayal of the dead leader's life. It recounted his confiscation of newspapers as well as his accomplishments in domestic areas. Feeling against La Prensa ran high and newspapers commented and editorialized, mostly negatively, about La Prensa's obituary. There were calls for the closing of the newspapers but they went unheeded.[8]

Cracks in the wall of Peronism were papered over during the first month following the death of Peron. But the cracks could not be hidden for long and they could be seen widening week by week in editions of La Causa Peronista and El Caudillo.

Both periodicals were tabloid. La Causa Peronista used three color cover and black and white inside. El Caudillo was black and white throughout. Both used all cap reverse headline on the front page.

On August 13, 1974, La Causa Peronista carried a front page Montonero declaration that "In La Plata and Cordoba Vandorism has declared WAR AGAINST THE PERONIST PEOPLE." Vandorism was a reference to Peronista Sheet Metal Union leader Segundo Vandor who, in the lace 1960s tried to develop a Peronista political movement without Peron. He was assassinated, and since his death any Peronists accused of deviating from orthodoxy were accused of being "Vandoristas" or espousing Vandorismo. La Causa Peronista cover headline referred to the killing of four long-time Peronists who were taken from their homes the night of August 6 and executed. The edition carried an account of the deaths and the following open letter (translation by the author).

COMMUNIQUE FROM THE MONTONEROS

To Our People:

> Once again we Peronists find ourselves deeply moved by the brutal violence of the anti-patriots. (los de la anti patria)
>
> Our companions, Horacia Chaves, hero of the resistance, and his son Rolando Horacio; our companion Tito Pierini, militant of the resistance and director of the SUPE strike in 1968; our companion Luis Norberto Macor, militant of the Perionista Youth (Juventud Universitrio

> Perionista), were dragged from their homes and summarily executed by the police of Lopez Rega, Lorenzo Miguel, Calabro Villar, Margaride y Silva.
>
> This was an every day occurrence during the military dictatorship, and it is so once again under the government which has stopped being Peronist. Because there is no Peronist government when the workers are left defenseless against entrepreneurs who freeze wages, close their work places and conduct massive layoffs. Because there is no Peronist government when the organisms of the state are put at the service of repression, torture and assassination. Because there is not Peronist government when the workers and the people don't participate actively in it.[9]

The letter goes on to outline the contributions of the four dead personistas and ended with the following paragraph:

> Once again we reiterate our decision to continue fighting. No violence can deter the decision of the people to reach final victory. To the enemy we say as our companera Evita: To the brutal violence of the anti-patriots we will respond with the organized violence of the people
>
> Until Victory My General Peron or Death
>
> MONTONEROS

In the same issue the Montoneros, and other elements that formed the peronista left, called for a mass demonstration on August 22. The call was for a "new cabildo abierto." In colonial Argentina it was the cabildo abierto or town forum that declared independence from Spain.

Object of the Montonero's wrath in the execution of the four persons in La Plata were Jose Lopez Rega, minister of Social Welfare; Lorenzo Miguel, head of the "62" labor organizations; Vincente Calabro, head of the General Confederation of Labor; Alberto Villar, chief of the federal police, and Luis Margaride, assistant chief.

On the right, El Caudillo geared up for a battle against what is considered

"subversive information media." In its August 30, 1974 edition, El Caudillo carried the masthead of the newspaper Noticias which had been closed by the government for being too sympathetic to leftists, particularly the ERP. Across the masthead of Noticias was a square stamp that said "shut down" and a paragraph from an editorial in a previous issue of El Caudillo which said:

> We are tired of the liberal-marxist press. We want Peronist newspapers, to explain to the country where it is going. We are tired of the fact that in the name of freedom, the press lies and distorts baldfacedly, intimidating the people with images of chaos and murder. The ERP are four crazy cats, they are an army only in the fevered mind of Bonaso and the tendenious yellow journal Noticias."10

The August 30 issue of El Caudillo offers an analysis of the Civic Radical Party. The article was probably written in response to the tremendous good will that Ricardo Balbin, head of the Civic Radicals, had gained in his nationally televised eulogy at Peron's funeral. The article is entitled, "Enough of Radicals, They Are Still Enemies!" El Caudillo says that Balbin may be a good human being, but was a failed politician, one who had been defeated three times in presidential elections. That Radicals should expect the Peronists to be consulting or "in dialogue" with them was presumptuous. The last paragraph of the article said that "We Peronists are not going to sit around waiting for the Radicals to get their act together. Because to make a cake you first have to grind the flour...."

The next article in the August 30, edition of El Caudillo was entitled, "Hear Me, Television Broadcaster!" The lead-in to the article said:

> I'm speaking to you. To you now that you have in your hands this formidable instrument of reconstruction and liberation which

> television is! To you, who must carry out the Peron's order to put (television) at the service of the fatherland (patria) and the people! To you, from whom we are going to require the work of titans because the hour of dwarfs has passed! To you I speak."

The article that followed was an out and out threat to the private television stations:

> "This is the first thing you must understand: We don't want television broadcasters with rights but with duties (emphasis the mine)." You haven't been put in your position to get rich, but to fulfill a revolutionary mission. So if someday we find out that you are making astronomical salaries, or are receiving commissions or that you manage the stations for caprice or personal interest, we aren't going to forgive you. We tell you very strongly that you belong to those (who controlled things) in the past, and if you keep working for them, then we'll have to exapropriate the stations."[12]

Two other short articles chided the marxist leninist tendencies of the Montoneros and said that the traditional peronista greeting "companero" had been societized by the Montoneros who used "tovarich" or "comrade." It commented on the decision of former president Hector Campora to remain in Mexico after his resignation as Argentina's ambassador there. It intimated that Campora was responsible for the bloodshed in 1972 at Ezeiza airport when fighting broke out between peronsita factions who were awaiting Peron's return from exile. The article said "there's some reasons that "Uncle" (Campora doesn't dare return."

The back page of El Caudillo for August 30 is a response to the cover of La Causa Peronista of August 27. The back cover of El Caudillo had four words in 108 point all cap type stacked as follows:

GRACIAS

A

ISABEL

GANO

Since the headline is in all caps there is no accent on the last O of the last word Gano. So the word says I win or, if the accent is assumed, (he) won. So that the message reads in English "Thanks to Isabel (he) Won." The message is one that El Caudillo follows unfailingly in subsequent issues--support the legitimacy, vitality and good sense of the administration of Mrs. Peron.

It was precisely that legitimacy, vitality and good sense that La Cause Peronista attacked vehemently in its August 27 issue. That edition carried a black, white and red cover with the headline or title "?Quien Voto A Isabel Lopez Rega?" or "Who Voted in Isabel Lopez Rega." With that cover the Montoneros escalated the interecine battle, and increased by many decibels the invective of the campaign.

Jose Lopez Rega, a former police corporal, joined Peron in exile in Spain and became an intimate of Peron and his wife. Some reports indicated that Lopez Rega introduced Peron to Isabel. Lopez Rega was an astrologer, who dealt in the occult. His enemies and those of Peron called him Peron's witchdoctor. When Peron died and Isabel became president, the power of Lopez Rega increased and people were sure that he, not Isabel, was making all the decisions in government. So the thrust of the Montoneros in La Causa Peronista's August 27 calling the new president Isabel Lopex Rega, struck deep.

Meanwhile, the bloody conflict between the "orthodox" Peronists and the Montoneros, for which the war of words had been precursor, erupted, Dozens of persons were killed on both sides in late August and September. On the one side, Army, police and political officials were gunned down in street attacks and ambushes and raids on military outposts. On the other,

college and university officials, "Peronist Youth" leaders, students and labor leaders with "Montonero" leanings were disappearing from their homes and offices. They were "arrested" by groups of individuals claiming to be Federal Police officers. Or they were simply kidnapped by bands of armed men. Many of them turned up in fields and garbage dumps on the outskirts of Buenos Aires--hands tied behind their backs and bodies full of bullet holes. The dead were victims of the "Argentine Anti Communist Alliance (AAA) which were linked directly to Jose Lopez Rega, Isabel Peron's "gray eminence."

On September 6, 1974, La Causa Peronista fired its final salvo of the war of words. From that day on El Caudillo had the field to itself and the voice of "orthodox" Peronism was virtually the only voice to be heard speaking for "justicialismo" and Juan Peron. In its September sixth issue La Causa Peronista gave a detailed account of how the Montoneros had kidnapped, imprisoned and finally executed General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu in 1970. Pedro Eugenio Aramburu was a leader in the "revolucion libertadora" that overthrew Juan Peron in 1955. Aramburu subsequently became president of Argentina under a military government that dealt harshly with Peronists and Peronist sympathizers in the years following revolution. When Aramburu was kidnapped and killed in 1970 the deed was attributed to the proscribed Argentine Revolutionary Army ERP. When the Montoneros came out in September, 1974, in La Causa Peronista taking responsibility for, and bragging about, the execution of Aramburu, the declaration reverberated throughout Argentina.

The Montoneros in the same issue announced that they were going underground. That they could no longer maintain a semblance of legitimacy in a fascist society

they said, and therefore were going to return to clandestine operations in the name of Peronism.

The furor which erupted with the distribution of the fateful edition of La Causa Peronista was immediate and far reaching. The government ordered confiscation of all copies of the issue, ordered the La Causa Peronista closed and its editors arrested. Congress took up the matter and ordered investigations. The government issued a decree that prohibited the mentioning of the name Montonero in newspapers or over the radio, and further, threatened all news media with shutdown if they published or broadcast, "information that tends to encourage violence or support proscribed organizations even obliquely."

The wording of the decree was vague and newspapers didn't know what they could and what they could not publish. The result was that they were tremendously cautious and coverage of the "war" was most difficult. One newspaper, the day after the government decree was issued, showed the extent to which the press had been intimidated. An army officer had been gunned down in the street by either Montoneros or ERP forces. On the front page of Clarin, the largest Buenos Aires Daily, the headline read, "Army Officer Ceases to Exist."

In the months that followed, the Montoneros kidnapped two executives of the Argentine conglomerate Bunge and Born and held them for $50 million ransom. The operation was daring and well planned. The AAA bombed the printing plant of the independent Cordoba newspaper La Voz del Interior, and kidnapped and executed a famous old Trotskyite Silvio Frondizi. The Montoneros snatched the body of General Aramburu from the Rocoleta Cemetary

and held it for weeks. The Peronists brought the body of Eva Peron back from Italy to Argentina to lie beside Peron in the chapel at the presidential residence in Olivos. And day-by-day and week-by-week the political death toll mounted.

Despite some spectacular raids and political successes, the government was winning the war against the Montoneros. The tide of the war and portents--ominous for non-peronist parties--could be seen on the cover of the December 26, 1974 edition of El Caudillo:

1 9 7 4

~~LEFTISTS~~

1 9 7 5

POLITICIANS?

But the Peronists themselves were living on borrowed time, on images and doctrines borrowed from an earlier time, and on March 26, 1978, the Army deposed Isabel Peron in a bloodless coup d'etat and once again the military was in charge in Argentina.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1959, p. 647.

2. Helen Bailey and Abraham Nasatir, Latin America: The Development of Its Civilivation. Englewood Hills, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1960, p. 576.

3. Asi Revista Semanal, ano XXI, No. 975, 25 febrero, 1975.

4. Herring, A History of Latin America.

5. Ibid., p. 648

6. Felix Luna, Argentina De Peron a Lanusse, Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta Argentina, 8th edition, 1974, p. 201.

7. Bailey and Nasatir, p. 578.

8. J. Laurence Day, "Peronism Under Fire," Kansas City Times, Oct. 17, 1975, p. 1.

9. "Comunicado de Los Montoneros," La Causa Peronista, Vol. I, No. 6. August 13, 1978, p. 7.

10. "Cerrado" El Caudillo Peronista, Vol. II, No. 41, August 30, 1974, p. 1.

11. "Escuchame...", El Caudillo, August 30, 1974, p. 1.

12. Ibid.